

BOSTON'S "CONTROLLED CHOICE" STUDENT ASSIGNMENT PLAN

prepared by the Citywide Educational Coalition

Q. WHY DOES BOSTON HAVE A NEW STUDENT ASSIGNMENT PLAN?

- A. Before 1974, Boston students went to public schools in their own neighborhoods. Schools were racially segregated as a result of School Committee policy. Schools in white neighborhoods were in better shape, and got more resources, than those in minority neighborhoods. To end this inequality, the U. S. District Court in 1974 ordered the Boston School Committee to desegregate its schools through a plan which assigned students from different neighborhoods to the same school. Schools became more racially mixed, but parents had little choice among schools.

In 1987, the court ruled that Boston schools were as desegregated as possible and freed the School Committee to change the 13-year-old assignment plan, as long as the schools did not become re-segregated. In 1989, the School Committee approved a new "controlled choice" student assignment plan. The plan was implemented only for kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 6 in 1989-90. All grades will be assigned under the new plan in 1990-91.

Q. WHAT ARE THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF "CONTROLLED CHOICE?"

- A. The plan divides the city into three geographic zones for grades K-8 (East, North and West) and a citywide high school zone. Parents may choose from among schools within their zone of residence (with a few exceptions). The racial composition of each grade in each school must reflect that of the zone, $\pm 10\%$. East Boston schools and some kindergarten assignments are excluded from racial quotas, and there are no involuntary assignments into or out of East Boston. Preference is given for siblings of students already in the school and for those who live near the school.

School improvement and decentralized decision-making are key elements. Schools are expected to set goals and objectives consistent with their educational "vision," then work to attract parents by developing outstanding programs and a positive school climate, improving their appearance, involving parents and the community, and raising achievement. *Zone improvement & planning councils*, comprised of parents, educators, university and community members, work with zone and central administrators and with schools in their zone to allocate resources, locate programs, and strengthen schools that have difficulty attracting students. Special needs and bilingual programs are supposed to be located first, based on the needs of the children in the zone -- not stuck in "leftover" space.

Q. WHAT WERE THE SUCCESSES OF THE NEW PLAN IN YEAR 1?

- A. Parents and students had more choice. They could choose from among 22-28 elementary and 5-7 middle schools in their zone, plus two citywide schools (Hernandez and Timilty). Under the old plan, the only choices for most elementary and middle school parents, other than the "geocoded" school, were 13 citywide magnet schools.

Most students got their 1st choice. Of those assigned by 8/25, excluding special needs and non-promoted students:

Grade:	K1	K2	1	6	Total
got their 1st choice	71%	85%	81%	69%	78%
got their 2nd choice	20%	10%	5%	10%	10%
got their 3rd-5th choice	7%	4%	2%	4%	4%
got an involuntary assignment*	1%	1%	12%	16%	14% **

* Because kindergarten is not required by state law, kindergarten applicants who got none of their choices were not assigned to any school without the parent's consent. As of January 1990, over 500 kindergarteners were still unassigned and on waiting lists, because their parents would not accept assignment to schools with seats available for their race. Grades 1 and 6 students who received none of their choices were assigned by the BPS to a school where they would improve the racial balance.

** The "total involuntary assignment" % is for grades 1 & 6 only.

Popular and unpopular schools were identified.

Schools where all, or nearly all, assigned students chose the school were:

Grade 1: Adams, Agassiz, Alighieri, Bates, Beethoven, Chittick, Clap, J. Curley, Early Learning Centers (North & East zones), Gardner, Grew, Haley, Hernandez, Hurley, Kilmer, Mather, O'Hearn, Russell, Winship and Winthrop.

Grade 6: Curley, Hernandez, Lewenberg, McKay, Rogers, Taft, Thompson, Timilty, and Tobin.

Schools where at least 60% of assigned students in at least one racial group didn't choose the school were:

Grade 1: Condon, Dickerman, Ellis, Endicott, Fuller, S. Greenwood, Hale, Higginson, Holland, Mendell, Perry, Stone, Tobin and Tynan.

Grade 6: Cleveland, Dearborn, Gavin, Lewis and Wilson.

Kindergarten. By zone, the most and least frequently chosen schools were:

	EAST ZONE	NORTH ZONE	WEST ZONE
Most chosen:			
K1	Murphy, Kenney, ELC	Quincy, ELC, Blackstone & H. Kent	Kilmer, Hernandez, Ohrenberger
K2	Lee, Marshall, Chittick	W. Prescott, Blackstone, Gardner	Hernandez, Hennigan, Kilmer
Least chosen :			
K1	Stone, Endicott, Dever	Hamilton, Baldwin, Otis	Longfellow*, Fuller, Dickerman
K2	Stone, S. Greenwood, Dever	Alighieri, Baldwin, Otis	Philbrick, Longfellow*, Bates

* Closed in August 1989.

- Of the 5 most frequently chosen schools in each zone, all but one offered Extended Day Program (EDP).
- Of the 5 least frequently chosen schools in each zone, none offered EDP.

Q. WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS WITH IMPLEMENTING THE NEW PLAN?

- A.** Probably the biggest problem was the newness and **size of the task**. Each zone was at least twice the size of other Mass. school districts (such as Lowell and Fall River) already using "controlled choice." Also, it was carried out by a number of administrators who were largely inexperienced with planning and implementing a complex, parent-centered plan. The "**school improvement**" piece was completely missing; zone planning councils did not begin meeting until the fall of 1989. Critics say that even given the scope of the task, and within the short time line between School Committee approval and implementation of the plan, more students could have been assigned to schools they listed as their top choices, and many problems could have been avoided -- such as:

Parent information was inadequate. Lack of training meant Parent Information Center and school based staff did not effectively counsel parents on choosing schools and filling out the rather confusing application. The low turn-out of minority parents by the first application deadline on May 15 was largely due to lack of outreach. Parents applying by that deadline had the best chance of getting a seat in a school they wanted. By grade and race, the percentages of students assigned by September 28* who applied by May 15 were:

K1 : African American ..47%	K2: African American. 79%	1: African American..77%	6: African American . 97%
white80%	white..... 98%	white.....120%	white 99%
other53%	other..... 86%	other.....77%	other..... 94%

* Until mid-November, there is a big difference between the number of students assigned and the number of students actually coming to school. As of September 28, the DNRs (Did Not Report) ranged from 22% of all assigned 6th graders to 40% of K1 students. Many assigned students, especially white students, leave the BPS in grade 1.

Kindergarten policy confused many parents, and BPS staff did not always provide accurate information on the restrictions of each option. Kindergarten parents could opt for:

half-day or Extended Day Program (EDP). Except for the three Early Learning Centers (ELCs) and the Hernandez, all K1 classes are half-day. EDP K2 is offered in 31 of the 77 elementary schools and ELCs.

permanent or temporary seats. A permanent assignment guaranteed a seat in the school through its highest grade (usually grade 5). Permanent assignments followed zone racial quotas. Temporary assignments were exempt from racial guidelines, and did not guarantee a seat in the same school for grade 1. All EDP assignments were permanent.

- Of parents choosing half-day programs, **77%** of 1st choices were for permanent seats. However, as a result of School Committee-approved policy, only **37%** of half-day seats for regular education programs were permanent.
- Of parents applying for K2, **55%** of all 1st choices were for EDP, & **49%** listed EDPs as their top 3 choices. About 31% of all K2 seats for regular education students were in EDP classes. As of January 1990, over 560 kindergartners were still on waiting lists for 202 empty EDP seats. Many parents have not accepted assignments because they don't want the schools where seats are available.

Waiting lists have not been cleared quickly. The BPS says two reasons for this are (1) difficulty in reaching parents when a seat becomes available; and (2) a data entry system which doesn't track daily changes in the number of available seats in each school.

Racial quotas for each grade were based on the total grade K-8 racial composition of the zone. The plan had said that seats should be allocated based on the racial composition of each grade within the zone. Because of differences between the zone-wide quotas and actual racial composition of each grade, many seats were saved for non-existent students, and many students received none of their choices. In the first registration period ending 5/15, **15%** of students who applied got no assignment, and in the second period ending July 15, **49%** received none of their choices.

August school closings and consolidations meant last minute reassignment of 3,400 students in grades K-12. Reduced seating capacity also has meant that most schools -- even "unpopular" ones -- are full. This removes some of the incentive for schools to improve in order to attract students.

A lost computer tape with 884 kindergarten applications meant all kindergarten applicants who applied by the May 15 deadline had to be reassigned. Some got a lower ranked choice or no assignment the second time.